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Third-Rate Answers

file only

For any popularly elected executive—whether the mayor of Dubuque or the president of the United States—there are basically only two available ways to run for reelection: the High Road and the Not-So-High Road. The campaign message from the candidate who chooses the High Road sounds like this: look at the progress we have made, what we have accomplished during this term; give me another term and we will finish the job. By contrast, the Not-So-High Road approach does not trumpet achievements, but concentrates instead on the alleged character and/or intellectual defects of the incumbent's opponent. Its campaign message sometimes acknowledges the incumbent's own imperfections, as in: I may be no day at the beach, but the other guy is no month in the country.

For reasons that seemed obvious at the time, Jimmy Carter's 1980 presidential reelection campaign pursued the Not-So-High Road approach, emphasizing that Ronald Reagan was a reckless hard-liner on poor Americans and on Red Russians and, perhaps, not playing with a full deck in those subjects a president was expected to master. The objective was to make Reagan look threatening and dangerous to voters.

For the Reagan campaign in October 1980 with a fragile lead, there remained one, admittedly risky, antidote to the mad bomber charges. Reagan could debate Carter.

But political debates are always unpredictable and frequently hazardous to a

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candidate's career. There is no way to prepare fully for all the issues an opponent might raise. Surprises are the norm. And voters, watching a debate, make their judgments on matters like confidence and poise and personality. And it's tough for anyone to be completely confident debating the incumbent president of the United States.

But Reagan bravely took that risk. And because he did not obviously lose, he undoubtedly "won" the Cleveland debate. David Stockman, who played the part of Carter in the pre-debate scrimmages, so impressed Reagan that he was eventually named budget director. The debate negotiations and preparation were handled so well by Jim Baker that Baker, in spite of his earlier work for Gerald Ford and George Bush, ended up as White House chief of staff. David Gergen, the present White House communications chief and, like Baker, an un-original Reaganaut, was deeply involved in the debate preparation. The lives and futures of all four men—Reagan, Stockman, Baker and Gergen—were all changed by that debate. Perhaps

also was the nation's.

Now we learn from Laurence Barrett's new book, "Gambling With History," that Reagan's debate preparation included a briefing book of Carter's that had been stolen from the White House. The origin of this document is of more interest, even, than its value. For anyone like Baker or Gergen, who had both worked for American presidents—there is only one question to be asked upon seeing or hearing about such a book: Where the hell did that come from? And nobody moves until the full answer is given.

Yesterday's written explanations to a House subcommittee do not satisfy. Baker's language—that he saw no evidence the document was "sufficiently sensitive to have been controlled or closely held" and that the book did not seem to be "an official document" sounded too carefully constructed. Serious questions persist for which answers must be provided: did Reagan's confidence come from the fact that he knew what Carter was going to say before he said it? Who stole the White House documents from Carter? What did Baker and Gergen do—and what was their responsibility as members of the bar—upon learning that they had access to and the use of property stolen from the president? When did Reagan learn of the theft? What did he do about it? What is he now doing about it? How many crimes were committed? It is time for some candid answers about a White House burglary that cannot be called "third-rate."